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THE BARNABITES

Manual of history and spirituality
of the Order of Clerics Regular
of St. Paul Beheaded

Chapter 3

ANTHONY MARY ZACCARIA'S SPIRITUALITY

Through the previous chapters we have had a glimpse of the salient characteristics of our Holy Founder. Let us try now to capture the essential traits of his spirituality

We have to go back to his years as a University student in Padua. The thinking required by his philosophical studies led him to an intuition which he capsulated in the statement. "Love helps a lot in acquiring science." Then the documents are silent until the Letter 1, addressed to his spiritual director Fra Battista da Crema (May 31, 1530), which depicts a young priest still battling with his own very self, with his "imperfections, cowardliness, and pride." But at the same time, with determination he is giving a very definite direction to his life.

Fra Battista's guidance was a very determining factor, and we can say that in the fall of 1530 our Saint left Cremona with a very well elaborated and complete set of intuitions and personal convictions. The experience of the University life and of his first apostolic attempts enriched Anthony Mary with a very concrete approach to life. But it will be the encounter with the Apostle Paul's personality and teachings to give an unmistakable brand to Anthony Mary's spirituality.

If it is true that this Saint of the 1500's, the century of Biblical renewal, has a profound and peculiar knowledge of the whole Scripture, for sure Paul's Epistles play a central role in his life. The theologian who is getting ready for the priesthood and the newly ordained priest look at St. Paul as the teacher *par excellence*, and as the model of life. The central role of Christ in Christian life, and the outburst and surge of the 'Reform' are the main ideas he learned from the Apostle.

So, let us touch upon the salient elements of St. Anthony M. Zaccaria's spirituality. In his conception of spiritual life, he immediately identifies a serious obstacle, lukewarmness. So that the effort to "become a spiritual person" would not be in vain, a method is needed, the method of "gradual" progress, as he describes it in his Letter 3 to Carlo Magni (July *28,* 1531), and Letter 11 to the couple Bernardo and Laura Omodei (June 20, 1539). Once the principle and the method have been guaranteed, where does spirituality lead? For him the goal is, "the gain of others," that is, the apostolate.

Spiritual Life and its great obstacle: Lukewarmness

The Holy Founder takes off with a precise vision of man's destiny: the universal and unavoidable call of man to holiness: "*The principal and only reason why man has been created and put in this world is to reach God*" (Sr VI, 167:11-12).

But God dwells in an inaccessible light and could not be fully reached or possessed except in the beatific vision. Here is then the function of the creatures: they are like a ladder leading us to him. In the design of God's Providence, the creatures constitute the book man must read to walk toward his Lord. But what has happened? - Anthony Mary questions his audience in St. Vitale's church in Cremona, a group of lay people eager to be more authentic

Christians in their families and in their society – What has happened to humanity to find it so difficult to proceed on the road of goodness? Man has sinned! The letters of the book of nature, before "*beautiful, recent, well delineated and clear letters*" (Sr VI, 167:13), now are obscure, and, although not erased, they have become "old," readable but almost invisible. Which means that, because of sin, man's vision has been impaired, he is not sure of his sight, and nature is not anymore the main road leading to God. God, then, in his mercy, has offered to humanity another book, the book of Scriptures, through which man has learned the basic principles which will guide his life.

Besides the help of nature and of the Sacred Book, God himself has come down on earth to lead us back to him. "*He who is Eternity, Light, Incorruptibility, Perfection itself… Oh great Goodness!*" - Anthony Mary exclaims – "*Oh, priceless Charity! God becoming man! And why? To lead man to God, to teach him the way and to give him light," "How can you say, then, that God did not create you as man to go to Him?*" (*Ibid*, 168:7-12).

If Nature, Scripture, and the Incarnation are the evidence that "*the principal and only reason why man has been created and put in this world is to reach God*", the Holy Founder knows how to use a decisive proof to convince those who are still unbelievers. The reason, he says, that drives you toward God lies in your own very self; just consider the fact that the Lord "*has given you a knowledge that does not and cannot end in the world, an unquenchable desire to taste God, to experiment the incorruptibility of your spirit, a continuous dissatisfaction with all the things of the world, and a continuous longing for the things of heaven*" (*Ibid*, 168:12-15).

These premises lead to a logic end: we are all committed to the full realization of our Christian vocation, we all must go to God! But there is a great obstacle, the obstacle *par excellence*, lukewarmness.

Lukewarmness is the black sheep for the Holy Founder. The whole of his life could be summarized as a continuous fight against "*that most deadly and greatest enemy of Christ Crucified*" (Lt 5, 45:3-4), to eradicate it from his own very self. We have already seen how Anthony Mary accused himself to have been for too long irresolute and negligent in God's way. Granted the exaggeration of Saints about their own defects we cannot deny that Anthony Mary overcame this vice through the exercise of virtue and a resolute challenge toward perfection.

His first worry for the soul entrusted to his care was not to allow them to fall into lukewarmness. And indeed this will be the sacred challenge left, few days before his death, in a letter overflowing with ardor for perfection and with paternal love. And so he scrutinizes in depth the causes of this vice and its manifestations to be able to come up with an effective

therapy. Talking to his audience in St. Vitale, he warns against the dangers of lukewarmness pin pointing one of its fundamental causes: the distinction between obligations and suggestions. Some say: while I am busy with what is commanded, why to worry about what is only suggested? Why all this praying, and sacrifices and alms giving? Why worry so much about spiritual things? Anthony Mary answers these insidious questions with great clarity.

It is true that not everything is a command: in Christian life there are precepts and there are counsels. But, Anthony Mary asks, what's the purpose of this distinction? For sure it has not been introduced to favor lukewarmness but rather to destroy it. Indeed, how many, "*as they saw the awesome perfection demanded by Christian living, the strict control on one's mind, the strict control of one's heart, the strict control of one's tongue, so much austerity of life, and balance in their behavior*" (Sr VI, 170:30-32), would have been discouraged thinking of been unable to reach such a perfection. They would have preferred mediocrity, an easy life, and so would have fallen into lukewarmness. But through this distinction the Saints, who devised it, seem to say: start observing the precepts, and once who have stabilized yourself in them, then move on to the exercise of the counsels, and in this way, step by step, you will reach perfection. For now, Anthony Mary says, do not worry about the most perfect, but "*start to do what is good, and, as a consequence, you will make progress and you will become better*" (*Ibid*, 171:2-3).

But there is another motive which disavows this distinction between precepts and counsel since it is not possible to have full observance of the precepts without observing the counsels too, as experience shows. Those who go to confession and communion once a year easily fall into sin, while those who receive the sacraments often avoid this danger, and if they should fall into sin they find it easier to stand up again. So, the Holy Founder concludes: "*Do you want to avoid mortal sins? Avoid the venial. Do you want to avoid the venial? Let go of some of the things which are licit and allowed*" (*Ibid*, 171:23-25).

There is also a third reason which disavows the distinction. This time Anthony Mary makes recourse to psychology. If you say: "*I do not want to do so much good... you would confuse and dilute the natural instinct, which does as much as it can*" (*Ibid,* 171:33-35). In virtue of his natural tendency toward the most perfect, man cannot be happy with mediocrity. "*Tell me*," he asks, "*do you wish only partial or total health? So many things, or as many as you could have?*" (*Ibid*, 171:35-37). If man longs for as much as possible, it is clear that he must care for his spiritual welfare putting no limits to it. Besides the great disadvantage toward oneself, and the damage, as Anthony Mary says, to the natural instinct, to be satisfied with a little would dishonor God, who did whatever he could for us.

An apodictic argument of Anthony Mary's fervent and persuasive words, this reference to Christ, who had no limits to his love for us, who did not spare himself even running to the shame of the cross, despising any fear or confusion.

With a Sermon totally dedicated to "*One of the causes of negligence and lukewarmness in the way that leads to God*" (Sr VI, 167:6-7), Anthony M. Zaccaria closes his apostolate in Cremona. With a Letter dedicated to the same subject he seems to seal, at the end of his life on earth, his message. It is the Letter 11 addressed to the Omodei couple in Cremona, fifteen days before his death, written on June 20, 1539.

He right away tackles the subject: "*My wish is that, having given yourselves to Christ, you would never experience lukewarmness, but would grow more and more. If by any chance you let lukewarmness get hold of you, you will not become spiritual, but,... very fast you will become like a pharisee*" (Lt 11, 73:29-33). This is what the lukewarm, or Pharisee does, the one who wants to appear as an irreprehensible Christian but falsifies the concept and finality

of Christian life. "*He gets rid of the big sing but then he takes pleasure in the small ones*" (Lt 11, 73:34-35): for example, he does not blasphemes, but then he keeps chatting away on worthless things; he does not look for honors, but he is delighted when he receives them; he does not eat much and does not drink much like the drunkards, but often eats what he likes.

So, there is a universal call to perfection, and there is one obstacle: lukewarmness. It must be overcome discrediting the sophisms of modern man, whose aim seems to be to keep man far away from God: away with precepts and counsels, big and small sins; away especially with negligence which refrains us on our way to God, leading us inevitably to lukewarmness.

The "Gradual" Method

It would be impossible to bring this program to realization, Zaccaria adds immediately, unless we follow a precise method: the "gradual" method.

This second aspect of the Saint's doctrine reveals the criteria and method used in spiritual direction. One of his Letters was written in the early years of his priesthood, when, having left Cremona, he was busy in Milan to lay the foundation of his historical institutes. It is addressed to a lawyer who must have been very influential in Cremona. A practice which will lead Carlo Magni to perfection is "*exacting, taking a lot of your time*" (Lt 3, 33:11-12), therefore he must adopt a well precise method, which Zaccaria summarizes in three points. The first thing he recommends is that "*in the morning and in the evening, and at every hour, …and at any time, … and in any position, that is, in or out of bed, kneeling or sitting, or in any other way you like; and most of all before any activity,*" you "*to talk with Christ about all your present happenings, even doubts and difficulties, especially tough doubts, exposing to Him all possible reasons, etc., as briefly as possible; and to tell Him your resolution, or better yet, to ask for His opinion, that for sure, for sure He will not deny it if you would gently insist; and I tell you and promise you that He will let himself be compelled, if you want it.*" (*Ibid*, 33:14-24).

If for a true spiritual life, this continuous dialogue with Christ, the shepherd of our soul, is needed, then Carlo Magni will have to reach a degree of interior recollection which will allow him a "*frequent elevation of the mind*" (*Ibid*, 34:8) and "*a continuity in prayer*" (*Ibid*, 34-35:43-1). He should act with God like he would with a friend, to whom he cannot give all his time, busy in his task as a lawyer, but greeting him warmly, and often paying attention to him with short words. Following this, Anthony Mary assures him, he will very easily get used to prayer without any harm to his work or to his body, and the external action will not disturb the elevation of the mind.

Once Carlo has gotten used to "*chat in a familiar way*" (*Ibid*, 33:38-39) with Christ, and has reached such a degree of recollection that even in the midst of his business he can stay in contact with God and elevate his mind and prayer to Him, than he will engage in a relentless fight against the vice which "*is the Captain-General*" (*Ibid*, 35:22) and dominates all the other defects. But he should stick to the following tactics: "*As you concentrate to eliminate*" the leading defect, you will try to eliminate all those coming under fire, like the one who aims at killing the captain of the army in the midst of his troops: aiming at him he clears the way eliminating whoever is on the path.

Anthony Mary is so sure to have given indispensable and useful suggestions that he recommends Carlo "*to read it not only with the lips but with deeds*" (*Ibid*, 35:10), assuring him that he will become the person is supposed to be, different from the one he is at the

moment, carrying on the responsibilities entrusted to him by God toward his soul and especially toward his neighbor. If, then, he will observe what he has been suggesting, very easily he will become "*close to the Crucified Lord and to the Cross*" (*Ibid*, 35:40-41). On the contrary he will "*always feel far away from Him*" (*Ibid*, 35:41-42) and "*will be a good man, but not a good Christian*" (*Ibid*, 35:3).

This Letter addressed to Carlo Magni seems to inspire the one addressed to the Omodei couple. The first is more peaceful, elaborated, while the second is more passionate, a more lively expression of the father giving his farewell to his children. Having warned his beloved against lukewarmness, Anthony Mary returns to his gradual method in spiritual life. The one who wants to become spiritual, he affirms, must begin eliminating one defect today, another tomorrow, "*and so he goes on persevering to the end until he eliminates the dirty skin of the flesh*" (Lt 11, 74:10-11), that is, the defects. At first he avoids harmful words, then, he uses humble words and manners. He avoids honors, and embraces humiliations. He stays in prayer not for one or two hours, but often he elevates his mind to Christ.

The Holy Founder knows very well that perfection cannot be achieved in one day. That is what he had been saying to his audience in Cremona. '*Who will be blamed for your slow progress?*" (Sr I, 118:9), Anthony Mary asks, and he concluded, "*You are the cause*." "*The man who wants to go to God has to go by steps, from the first to the second, and to the third and so on. He cannot start from the second and avoid the first, because his legs are too short, his steps are too small."* In his nervous style, he gives an example*, "Why don't you go up to the attic? Because you do not use the stairway*" (*Ibid*, 118:22-26).

Anthony Mary comes back to this theme in Sermon III, where he emphasizes that those who want perfection are few since they do not start from the first step and so proceed in order. It is exactly what he writes to the Omodei couple: "*I do not say that you should do everything in one day, but still I say: my wish is that you would be careful to do something more every day, to decrease every day in some appetite… and this because*," he adds, "*of your desire to grow in virtue, to diminish in the imperfections, and to avoid the danger of becoming lukewarm*" (Lt 11, 74:21-26).

The imposition of a specific method for perfection is required not for the pleasure to be engaged in a risky task causing us hardships and suffering, but because we are called to the exercise of virtue, to conquer holiness.

"*Do not think*," the Holy Founder adds, "*that my love for you, and the good qualities you are endowed with, could ever compel me to desire for you to be small saints. My wish and desire for you is that you become great saints, since you are able to do it and it is your desire, in so far as you are willing to grow and to give back to Jesus Crucified, from whom you have received them, his gifts and graces which have grown more beautiful. Because of the affectionate love I have for you, I beg you to be willing to make me happy in this. Because I know the high degree of perfection, I know the abundance of graces, I understand the fruits Jesus Crucified wants to see flourish in you, and the heights to which he wants to lead you…" "Let it be known to you that I would be hurt to the marrow of my soul were I not sure that you not only ought to do this, but even greater things ever accomplished by any Saint*" (*Ibid*, 74:26-34, 38-39).

At this point he becomes aware again not to have written "*any word without some special meaning*" (*Ibid*, 75:1); it is the conviction that if they read and think over his words they will be dispensed from any other reading, and if they will practice what is suggested together with "*the book of the sweet memory of the Cross of Christ*" (*Ibid*, 74:44), that is the Gospel, they will be led to great perfection.

Obviously this method does not apply only to the laity but also to Religious. One example is found in Letter V, where Anthony Mary describes the spiritual ascesis of the Angelics. But the most eloquent page is in the Constitutions, where, listing the qualities of "*the reformer of good morals*" (Cs XVIII, 251:37), he describes the commitment toward a gradual perfection. "*Strive always to increase what you have started in yourself and in others, because the height of Perfection is infinite"* (*Ibid*, 254:5-6), *"You must resolve,"* then*, "to go always further and towards more perfect things*" (*Ibid*, 253:41).

The Aim of the Spiritual Life: Apostolate

The last quotation from the Constitutions introduces us to another aspect of St. Anthony M. Zaccaria's spirituality and doctrine. The search for perfection is not only a personal goal, but it is also a social reality, therefore the imperative of the apostolate.

The two classical texts are found in Sermon II and in Letter V where Anthony Mary affirms that, "true spiritual life" consists in an absolute detachment from oneself, total union with Christ, reached through the power of the Holy Spirit, who makes of us "Living pattern of Christ," so as to be able to say, "*Be imitators of me as I imitate Christ, as though they were saying: 'Would you like to see the living example of Christ? Look at us'."* (Sr II, 129:23-24).

His cry is, "*Let us build up ourselves and the others in Christ*" (Lt 7, 56:41-42). But this ascetical vision gives rise to a problem: what's the relationship between Religious Life and the apostolate? This is not an academic question if we reflect that its solution constitutes the very *raison d'etre* of the Clerics Regular, that is, of an institute which has tried to merge in harmony the two realities of Christian life.

The Zaccarian thought can be formulated in two propositions:

1. the function of Religious Life in relation to the Priesthood is to empower one to gain others for Christ;
2. mutuality: apostolic life is guarantee and stimulus toward perfection: "*the means of God's love is the love for our neighbor*" (Sr IV, 155:22).

According to Anthony Mary there is no gain of neighbor which is not the fruit of fullness of interior life. The distinctive sign of the "legitimate" children of Paul consists in sharing with the Apostle:

- "*noble and profound love for Christ Crucified*."
- "*for sufferings and humiliations*,
- "*longing to conquer and lead our neighbor to the attainment of perfection*" (Lt 5, 45:31-32).
- This program outlined in Letter V, comes back in the Constitutions, "*The true purpose of the Reform will be recognized in this: if they will look only for*
- *the absolute Honor of Jesus Christ,*
- *the absolute advantage of the neighbor,*
- *pure infamies and contempt for themselves*" (Cs XVI, 248:22-24).

The strict dependence between the life of perfection and of the apostolate is a constant recurrence in the writings of Anthony Mary.

The Angelics before they "*unfurl their flags*" to conquer souls, must compete with one another in the life of perfection (Lt 5, 45:5, 9-10).

To one of his cooperators in Vicenza, he says: "*This will be of merit for you and for the others*," (Lt 6, 50:33-34) and he sends the message to Lady Lucretia: "*I wish she would resemble me: that she would try to make progress not only in herself, which is very little, but also in the others*" (*ibid*, 51:6-7).

In a letter to Fr. Soresina the Holy Founder describes the Barnabite as a "*simple, fervent, lover of gaining your neighbor, not afraid in the midst of passions and temptations, but keeping always the same order of virtues both when you are troubled and when you are appreciated and at peace*" (Lt 10, 68:35-38). And he invites Fr. Soresina, to "*never cease in making progress with the others*" (*Ibid*, 69:36)

The Constitutions summarizes Anthony Mary's ideal, "*Divine things should not be exercised if not by divine people*" (Cs XWI, 254:13).

The other leading idea in Anthony Mary's spirituality is that apostolic life drives the individual toward his own perfection.

"*Surely, my friend*," he says in Sermon IV, "*you can understand how necessary the love of the Lord our God is… One and the same thing helps you to acquire, expand and increase it, and in addition it shows when it is there… It is charity, the love of our neighbor*" (Sr IV, 150:30-34).

The same concept is repeated in the letter to the Cofounders: "*Come on, brothers! If until now we have had any indecisiveness, let us get rid of it as well as any negligence: and let us rush like madmen not only to God, but also to our neighbor, for he is the one who receives what we cannot give to God, who does not need any of our goods*" (Lt 2, 30:9-11).

The most enlightening passage is in a letter he wrote in the name of Paola Antonia Negri. Interpreting the feelings of the "divine Mother," Anthony Mary, in a rather contorted style, notes that the abandonment of "*that first fervor I had to lead my neighbor to God*" has caused the loss of "*light*" and "*knowledge*" of interior life. "*Often wishing to look at the state of others, and through them update mine. That certitude I was experiencing in the others, gave me assurance for my state… It would have been a less evil to become partially covered with dust in soliciting the others, but keeping the former light, rather than staying away from my neighbor, thus losing what gave me interior life, at the end it would have cleansed me from that dust.*" (Lt 12, 78:24-31). Therefore, he concludes*, "I have decided to forget about myself and to dedicate myself completely to the spiritual care of my neighbor. In this way I hope that, gaining him, the beautiful Crucified Lord would give me back the light and the fire that was keeping me alive*" (*Ibid*, 78:7-10).

The children of Anthony M. Zaccaria must have learned well the lesson if we read in the first Community Acts (May 18, 1548): "*True faith in Christ and obedience is needed, together with a total abandonment in it, and to try for the honor of God, to busy oneself for our neighbor: the more one busies himself with the neighbor, so much more he will receive the fullness of the spirit*."

Anthony Mary, the Spiritual Reformer

Anthony Mary had no pretence to be a revolutionary. He seems to use the saying of St. Gregory the Great: "The Saints generate sedition but through loving" as the headline for the program of reform which is outlined in the last chapters of his Constitutions.

He has made a diagnosis of the evils of his time, and we have seen that for him the cause of "*the deterioration of customs*" is that "*most deadly and greatest enemy of Christ Crucified… lukewarmness*" (Lt 5, 45:3-4). Therefore, the program for the reformer of good customs will be in lifting up high, with boldness, the Cross way above lukewarmness, as strong as it may be.

We are familiar also with his plan of reform: renewal of religious practice centered on sanctification (Sr III) and the primacy of charity moving from our neighbor to God (Sr IV).

Of great interest is the presentation he makes of the reformer and of his qualities, dedicating to it the whole chapter XVIII of the Constitutions. He shows a noble and daring heart, with contempt for risk and half ways: a man very much aware of the difficulties involved, deeply convinced of the need for interior life and of God's help for this task, whose success is threatened by invisible as well as visible enemies.

Only on these conditions the "*reform will endure for at least some centuries*" (Cs XVII, 253:35), the Saint affirms.

The coadjutors in the Reform

Anthony Mary in launching his program of reform surrounds himself with "coadjutors," as he says, to help him. Slowly he elaborates the ideal to be incarnated by the Barnabites and the Angelics.

So that his children would be "divine and saint," he has two basic and absolute conditions: those to be admitted must be "*of help to themselves and to others*," and of "*great will*" (Cs, XI, 237:18-19, 23). Pay attention to these conditions for those who want to enter the Zaccarian family: they must reach a harmonious fusion of "light" and "fire." The light is the intelligence ready and well trained, the fire is firmness and steadfastness of the will.

After these premises, the Holy Founder spends a lot of time for the formation of the novices (Cs XII), creating the ideal for the Barnabite.

Anthony Mary's worry is to keep his children faithful to the outlined program: just the thought of degeneration would make him change his mind on all the work accomplished making him to prefer "*not to have given birth to them*" (Lt 10, 69:7-8; cf Lt 5).

Only with faithfulness to the program would his children be "*stock and columns to renew our Christian zeal*" (Lt 7, 57:6). In case this aim would be compromised by the inevitable presence of some lukewarm members, then he does not hesitate to declare a state of schism in the communities, while invoking plenty of blessings for those who are full of zeal (cf Cs XVI, XVII).

KEY DATES

1530	**1539**	**1542**
Institution	Death of St. Anthony M. Zaccaria	1st chapel dedicated to St. Paul Decapitated close to St. Ambrose

1545	**1579**
Oldest document, *Liber Capitulorum* House of Paul Decapitated	Constitutions

1535: Clerics Regular of St. Paul — 1550: Clerics Regular of St. Paul Decapitated

RESIDENCES

1532	**1533**	**1534**	**1535**	**1545**
With Torelli By St. Ambrose	September 29 St. Catherine	July-September neighboring houses and garden	By St. Ambrose	St. Barnabas Fr. Morigia 1st superior